

*Joshu asked Nansen: 'What is the path?'*

*Nansen said: 'Everyday life is the path.'*

*Joshu asked: 'Can it be studied?'*

*Nansen said: 'If you try to study, you will be far away from it.'*

*Joshu asked: 'If I do not study, how can I know it is the path?'*

*Nansen said: 'The path does not belong to the perception world, neither does it belong to the nonperception world. Cognition is a delusion and noncognition is senseless. If you want to reach the true path beyond doubt, place yourself in the same freedom as sky. You name it neither good nor not-good.'*

*At these words Joshu was enlightened.*

This koan operates on so many levels and covers a vast territory; on the one hand, it seems simple and straightforward: "everyday life is the path." On the other, it references that which is beyond ordinary concepts: "Cognition is a delusion and noncognition is senseless." We normally don't think of everyday life as containing something as vast as the sky, yet this is what is being said here. Even though everyday life is the path, it contains the whole sky, or that is to say, it is unlimited, vast. In a sense, that's one of the mysteries of this koan ... how could it be that our ordinary lives be something that is neither perception nor nonperception, neither cognition nor noncognition, neither good nor not-good, and vast as the sky?

But that's really what is at issue here. The path isn't separate from our ordinary lives --- it's not something far away, remote, in some Buddha fields in some remote heaven. But the path isn't just how we usually take our ordinary lives; and we think our ordinary lives are good and bad, are about what we perceive ordinarily, about how we conceptualize our lives ... but there is something beyond good and bad, beyond the way we usually take our perceptions and cognitions. It's neither separate from our everyday life nor is it the way we usually imagine or take our everyday lives.

So there is intense, vast freedom within the very being of our everyday life, beyond concepts yet not resting in some dull place of no thoughts (the koan addresses yet another issue, the notion that somehow the point of practice is to get rid of cognition ---- "noncognition is senseless" --- the koan points at another non-dual issue, i.e., that the path is neither limited to ordinary cognition nor is it about non-cognition or simply going to a place of blankness or void). What is that? What could be all these things at once?

The interesting thing about koans is they often posit these seemingly contradictory ideas and suggest they are not, in fact, as contradictory as we think --- there's another option. In this case, there are quite a few of these: everyday life versus something as boundless as the sky, good vs bad, cognition vs noncognition, etc.

And then, of course, Mumon adds his cheeky comment:

*Nansen could meet Joshu's frozen doubts at once when Joshu asked his questions. I doubt that if Joshu reached the point that Nansen did. He needed thirty more years of study.*

Of course, here he is making a slightly sarcastic reference to one thing the koan didn't address, the duality between study and non-study --- the koan says it's beyond study, yet Mumon here says Joshu needed to study for 30 more years. Yet that, too, isn't contradictory --- though the point of the path is always already available before we even begin, and thinking of it as the object of study isn't the point: it still helps to

study and practice, for years and years in fact. This is also a seeming contradiction which is not a contradiction...